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Bishop of Parramatta

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Pastoral letter to the young people of Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains

“I am with you always” Matthew 28:20

My dear young people of Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains,

I write to you today from my own small apartment in Harris Park, in one of countless LGAs of concern across Sydney. COVID cases are frighteningly high in suburbs surrounding me. Like you, I have been locked down for almost 12 weeks and my balcony, with its small makeshift garden has become an intimate place of respite from the concrete walls of my building.

I want to let you know that I have been thinking deeply about the situation we share. There is no doubt that the restrictions and subsequent impact on your life, family, and friends is being felt just as strongly by you. It's OK to feel angry, emotional, overly dependent or withdrawn. I imagine, too, that you're overhearing the stress that your parents, guardians, or roommates are under with home schooling, working from home, loss of income, relationship strain, loneliness or even too many people living too closely together.

I can't imagine what the loss of important milestones in your life might feel like at this time, but I do know that through the example of Jesus you will be resilient, adaptive and bounce back. His resurrection is proof that there is always light in the darkness.

Most heartbreaking for me in recent weeks has been what reports are calling the “shadow pandemic”. Each day more than 40 children and teenagers from our own backyard are being rushed to emergency departments due to self-harm and mental health problems.

We've put so many things on hold - during this time - that give us hope. Hope is what gives us the most joy in life and sometimes on our worst days I know it can feel like we're just not moving anywhere and progressing. Anxiety, depression, and far worse, is on the rise.

During this time, please, keep talking. Whether it be face-to-face around the dinner table or over the phone or Zoom. Please, also keep walking and keep active. Walk with a friend who lives nearby or someone you live with. Exercise is so good for our mental health and our bodies. It gets us out of the four walls that can feel oppressive, dark, and confined, and into the sunlight that is warm on our face and the fresh air moving through our lungs.

This R U OK?Day, I encourage you to consider going a little more deeply in supporting each other and turn that one, simple, but potentially powerful question into a true conversation.

I'm also pleased to share with you a website we launch today called **With You** (parracatholic.org/withyou) a collection of new initiatives we've developed to journey with you, accompanied by some outstanding resources that I pray will find, and grow that sense of HOPE in your hearts during these challenging times. This includes content from some wonderful organisations. Remember that there is absolutely no shame in reaching out to them for help.

I will continue to pray for you and your good health. May you find continued peace and serenity during these troubled times. As scripture reminds us, we are not to be afraid nor dismayed, for our Lord is with us wherever we go.

I have found great comfort lately in reflecting on the scriptural account of the 'Journey to Emmaus' and particularly turning my mind to how the disciples felt on the road and knowing that they could share with each other their doubts and struggles that the Lord became present to them. In such company they journeyed on to Eucharist and then mission.

We have so much to look forward to together.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read "Vincent Long Van Nguyen".

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Given at Parramatta on 9 September 2021